

The Joni Mitchell song, “Both Sides, Now,” is easiest to remember for its poetic declarations of intimate, hard-won knowledge of love and life, and as such as a hymn to wisdom, but her lyrics indicate a deeper wisdom than knowledge alone by going on to proclaim that some of what she’s seen is illusory, and despite all she’s learned about them, she really doesn’t know love, or life, at all. It takes true wisdom, courage, honesty, and humility to confess that the defining mysteries of human existence that have captured and inspired the finest minds of every generation have not made an exception, just for you, and laid bare their inner nature. And it’s a catchy song, too. Not bad for four and a half minutes of folk rock.

Jesus also could convey great insights and enduring wisdom in a compact format. Parables were a mainstay of his teaching: short stories drawing from everyday life and familiar customs that provoke the audience. Instead of the talking animals of fables, parables use human characters who depart from normal behavior to engage and inspire us. Jesus also loved to charge up his audiences with a dash of hyperbole, that is, outrageous over-exaggeration. Recently we heard about a king who invited the poor of his kingdom to a wedding feast and then kicked out one man for failing to wear a fine robe, and a murderous contest between tenant farmers and their landlord. Today’s parable isn’t just another show, it’s twisted and over-the-top, and nobody is left laughing.

Jesus sets up a comparison between two factions of bridesmaids, and tells us that one group is wise and the other, foolish. But neither looks like a group we would be proud to imitate. Yes, the “foolish” bridesmaids should have been better prepared, but there’s no sense in arguing about their past failures by the time the problem is identified. We can all relate to the awful feeling of realizing you are unprepared when it’s too late to fix the problem, like showing up to a show without your tickets or only realizing once you got to church that you left your sermon at home. But you could hardly call these moral failings, just honest, embarrassing mistakes. And the so-called foolish bridesmaids even show their resourcefulness, making a heroic last-ditch effort to find the oil they need in the middle of the night.

If anyone deserves condemnation, isn’t it the bridesmaids who brought extra oil and refuse to share? Isn’t that the kind of selfishness Jesus usually condemns? Most of us can relate to that feeling too, though, the frustration of our projects being held up by partners who failed to make the simplest preparation, who only pique us further by asking us to make sacrifices to cover for them. Let’s be honest here, if we’ve done enough living, we’ve seen the problem from both sides, now. Some days we’re driving in a hurry, cursing the slowpoke blocking our lane, and other days we’re focused and cautious, cursing the maniac looming in our rearview mirror.

And what about the bridegroom himself? He’s terribly late, a lot of people have gone to a lot of trouble for him, and he shuts out the bridesmaids who were going to the most trouble of all, claiming he doesn’t even know them. And everyone else seems fine

with this. Clearly we're deep in parable-land here. The relatable characters and wrenching moments are crafted that way precisely to draw us into the story, and boy did they draw us in, but they and the story itself only exist to make a greater point. That's the wonderful thing about parables: they provoke our imagination and emotions, but ultimately they mean exactly and only what Jesus intends them to mean. And this time, Jesus tells us what the parable means — sort of. Jesus says, "Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour."

OK. Jesus went to a lot of trouble to draw our attention to this teaching, but while his explanation is provocative, it's still metaphorical, and a little mysterious. But in a way, it makes sense intuitively. Even the "wise" bridesmaids fell asleep, alongside the "foolish," and we aren't meant to be like either group. Which raises the questions, what are we waiting up for, and since Jesus wasn't literally commanding permanent sleep deprivation, what did he mean by "keep awake"? Again, the parable connects with our intuition. The event we are meant to keep awake for is the final, conclusive intervention of God in world affairs, the parousia, the second coming. Until then, we are meant to "keep awake" by living Christian lives, illuminated by God's enduring wisdom.

The scholarly consensus is that Matthew's Gospel was written roughly fifty years after the events it describes, quite possibly to preserve the eyewitness accounts of the original disciples who were by then dying off. The first Christians' lights were going out. The first generation had expected that Jesus would return in their lifetimes but by the time Matthew sat down to write, Christians were beginning to accept that Jesus might be away for longer than they thought. They needed to remember what being with Jesus was like; they needed encouragement and hope; they needed to know how to live as Christians. And they found it, perhaps ironically, in some of Jesus's apocalyptic teachings.

Apocalyptic is a commonly misunderstood genre. It's not about the future. It's not about heaven and hell. We just heard a teaching about the afterlife in Paul's letter to the Thessalonians, and it's quite simple. "God will bring with him those who have died," and, "we who are alive... will be with the Lord forever." God loves those dwelling under the clouds and those above, and saves those on both sides, now — so don't worry about heaven, God will welcome you in. But that doesn't mean that our choices in life don't matter.

Apocalyptic teachings like the one in today's Gospel are all about how to live right now. And the short answer is, live as if Jesus could drop in at any time. Live in ways that please him. Live according to the radiant and unfading wisdom Jesus shared and embodied. Live in joyful expectation of reunion with love personified. Be reconciled with those who let you down, and those whom you let down. Set pride and fear aside. Live in a spirit of grateful generosity, radical welcome and inclusivity. The divine wisdom we need to live in hope is easily discerned, for she hastens to make herself known to those who desire her. She seeks us out, appears in our paths, and meets us in our

thoughts. God's wisdom will not explain the mysteries of life, but she will show us how to live. Living by God's wisdom brings joy both to God and to us.